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10 point guide to dodging publishing pitfalls

Veteran academic authors share their hard-won tips

March 6, 2014

Source: Dale Edwin Murray

It involves blood, sweat and tears, and the experience is most frequently likened to childbirth. But with the right support and guidance, the process of publishing an academic book – a key step in most scholarly careers – need not be too excruciating. While the careful crafting of the manuscript itself is the key step in a book's formation, many other elements contribute to the creation of the finished volume and, ideally, the author will benefit from the expertise of colleagues and professionals at every stage of its gestation. For first-time or inexperienced authors who have set their sights on a career-enhancing scholarly monograph, however, getting to grips with the dos and don'ts of academic publishing can be daunting. *Times Higher Education* asked a panel of academic authors to share their experience and expertise and to point out pitfalls to avoid.



1. On finding the right publisher

Finding the right publisher is one of the most important steps you will take as an author. Our panel's advice? Ignore flattery, do not be blinded by

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money and remember that not all publishers are created equal.

Richard J. Evans: “If it’s a first book, don’t worry about the money; go for a prestigious university press, unless you have an obviously commercial product (for example, a book with ‘Hitler’ or ‘Nazism’ in the title). Bear in mind that a successful first book with a good university press generates a lot of secondary income in terms of jobs, tenure, promotion and the like.”

Tim Birkhead: “Don’t be flattered by a publisher’s invitation for a first book. Remember that their aim is to make money, while you are doing this for love – and like anyone in love, you are desperately vulnerable to flattery. I’ve seen the effect of a publisher’s flattery override common sense. Speak to experienced colleagues before agreeing to anything.”

Jos Boys: “In my experience – in the arts and humanities – there are now many types of academic publisher. At one end are those that accept a wide range of proposals, but then do short runs in hardback and will print in paperback only if the book is successful. Some of these will leave distribution entirely up to you. In the middle are more reputable companies that put greater effort in and print more copies initially but still pass on as many costs as possible. They are also quite risk averse and show a definite preference for textbooks (because of the likely sales). At the other end are well-known publishers with a strong academic and international reputation. Their editors act as much tougher ‘gatekeepers’. If you are new to academic publishing, simply gaining good experience of the whole process will be seen as less impressive in the research excellence framework than working with one of the more prestigious publishers.”

Barbara Graziosi: “My advice would be to submit a book proposal to a press that is known for using eminent peer reviewers: that ensures good feedback on the proposal, which can be used whether or not that particular press accepts the book for publication.”

Martin McQuillan: “In general, the more peer review that your manuscript is subject to, the better it will be. You should immediately be suspicious of a publisher with no peer review process. The better presses all engage in lengthy peer review. Despite what REF panel members are



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contractually obliged to say, where you publish matters. It matters to your community and also to interview and promotion committees. Everyone must submit themselves to others' withering gaze at some point. It can be painful at times but it makes for a better book."

2. On common pitfalls

There are scams and traps aplenty when you are trying to get your first book out: so seek expert advice and never, ever pay someone to publish your work. Be sure to read the small print.

Tim Birkhead: "Join the Society of Authors; for the price of a subscription, they'll check your contract and make sure you aren't being shafted. I once signed a contract that, in publisher's gobbledegook, meant I'd agreed never to write a competing book for another publisher! Luckily the bastards went bust after a few years, but I wish I'd had someone to check the contract for me."

Martin McQuillan: "Content is hard to produce, so never give it away cheaply. Do not publish with inappropriate presses just because it is easy to do so. If they contact you unsolicited over the internet asking to publish your PhD or conference proceedings they are on a trawl and will have approached hundreds. They only want to sell copies of your book back to your contributors. Walk away from anyone who asks you for money to publish your book. If you believe in your material, take it seriously and treat it well."

Susan Bassnett: "Do your homework. Look at publishers' lists to see whether your proposal fits with their priorities. A fundamental mistake made by prospective authors is to look first at the status of the publisher rather than at what they actually publish. Do not pay to publish your work. If you are asked for money at the start, you can be sure that the in-house editing will be rubbish, the copy-editing will be left to you and the distribution will be non-existent."

3. On writing a proposal

Although it can be time-consuming, it is important to take pains over your proposal – you will stand a greater chance of acceptance, and your book will be the better for it.

Jos Boys: “Look at publishers’ catalogues in your subject area (which will tell you a lot about the editor’s preferences) and download the author proposal forms from their websites. Using the publisher’s pro forma will not only help you shape your book proposal but also enable you to suggest the length of the book, how many illustrations you want included and your preferred publication date. I have always found that, if your proposal is tempting (and robust) enough, you can follow up with an informal meeting with the editor where you can discuss content, length, ‘look’, intended cover price, print run (hardback, paperback, e-book), who pays for what and any other concerns. British academic publishers usually send your proposal out for two or three ‘blind’ reviews. This can take some time (often several months) but will add a lot of weight to your book idea, if positive. American (and some European) publishers seem to work differently, and I have had books accepted by both without reviews.”

Alan Ryan: “Don’t send an unrevised PhD to anyone; always ask whether they’d like to see something first.”

Susan Bassnett: “When writing a proposal, do so in plain, jargon-free language and give clear indications as to competing texts, target readers, time frame and word length. Ideally, send a sample chapter or, if you’re not at that stage, at the very least send a developed plan with details of each chapter. In short, prepare the proposal for a publisher as carefully as you would prepare a bid for funding. But also consider whether the best way forward would be to publish first in journals rather than going for a monograph. After all, the cost of monographs means that readers are often deterred from buying your work, even if you manage to get it into print.”

4. On editors

How can you secure the right one? What if they leave during the process? And what happens if you do not like what they are doing with your manuscript? There may be a balance to be struck between the prestige of your publisher and how much attention you will get from them. Personal relationships also matter.

Cary Cooper: “The best editors and publishers are those that trust you and don’t change the ground rules after you have agreed a contract and modus operandi. Some will do anything to get you to do the book/monograph but then

constantly interfere, demanding unnecessary minor changes and stopping the flow. Make sure you like and trust the editor as a person, that he or she seems a supportive rather than 'command and control' type, and that you clearly define the psychological contract between the two of you before signing anything (modes of working together, mutual expectations and so on). Unfortunately, there is a high turnover of editors in publishing and it is likely that you may lose your editor during the gestation period of your book. It is important that you meet, face to face, with any replacement to make sure that you have the same expectations and that you can work with them. Sometimes there is only one person at a publisher responsible for editing books in your field, and you will be lumbered with him or her – if this happens you should let him or her know about any ground rules that you and the previous editor had established.”

Richard J. Evans: “Ask around to give yourself the best chance of getting a supportive and effective editor. Editors quickly get a reputation for being encouraging (or not), conscientious (or not), imaginative (or not). Bear in mind that you also have to balance out the advantages of a prestigious publisher against the possibility that the editor there may not be very helpful, as has been the case in some instances in my experience of helping my PhD students to find a suitable publisher.”

Martin McQuillan: “Even now I hate to be edited, but if you work with great editors who know their stuff and love the material, there is much more to be learned from a ruthless edit than from taking the path of least resistance with an unquestioning press.”

5. On production issues

In the world of academic books, copy-editing has changed and much of this work is now outsourced by publishers. But while there are some horror stories, input from true professionals can improve your work.

Barbara Graziosi: “I experienced in-house copy-editing with my first book, and it was excellent. Indeed, awe-inspiring. Old-school copy-editors at Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press were important figures in the academy: they genuinely improved books and saved authors from embarrassing errors of fact and travesties of style. Some were first-class scholars in their own right. In

Italy, Sebastiano Timpanaro, one of the most important Latinists of the 20th century, worked as a copy-editor rather than as an academic. Since my first book, copy-editing has been outsourced and has completely changed in character. In my experience it is now a perfunctory affair at best, and introduces several errors at worst.”

Richard J. Evans: “There’s not much you can do about a publisher’s approach to copy-editing. Publishers have used freelance copy-editors as long as I’ve been writing books. I always imagine they are ladies of a certain age in North Oxford with a sharp eye for grammar and style. In my case they need to read German, for the footnotes. I’ve had some superb input from first-rate freelancers working for a variety of publishers.”

Jos Boys: “My co-authors and I had a problem with one book that was professionally copy-edited (by a freelancer the university employed) and was published with lots and lots of errors – probably because of incompatibilities between Word and the layout software used by the designers. It had to be withdrawn and reissued. In another case, we did a ‘built-in’ index (automatically linked to specific phrases so it would survive whatever the formatting). Again, the designers could not cope and we had to re-index – and pay again.”



6. On presentation

Who decides on the cover image, how many illustrations will be included and who will source them and obtain permissions? What about the publication date, price, format, footnotes and whether it will include a bibliography and index? Think about what

you are and are not willing to let others decide on your behalf and be prepared to involve yourself in the details.

Jos Boys: “Academic publishing has become very DIY. Don’t be surprised if you find yourself responsible for everything from illustration costs and copyright permissions to indexing, marketing activities and writing the ‘blurb’ on the back of the finished book.”

Richard J. Evans: “The level of control you retain will depend on your contract, so read it carefully. You need to ensure that you have the final say on the jacket illustration (for example, as a historian of Nazi Germany I always send back jacket designs if there’s a swastika on them). Sometimes designers make crass errors (a colleague writing a book on Prussia sent back the proposed design because the designers had reversed the ‘R’ in the title – ‘Well it’s Russian, innit?’). For a first book you’ll have to get permissions yourself. You have no control over format but look carefully at the small print for e-book royalties; in general there’s always a bit of leeway to increase the royalty rates in the contract. Insist on a bibliography and index. Footnotes at the bottom of the page are a bonus. If you’re writing a commercial book, you won’t be able to stop them being put at the end. Check the books produced by publishers in your field; average prices charged even by university presses vary widely, so go for the publisher whose prices are lowest (£50 is definitely too high!).”

Barbara Graziosi: “Editors of scholarly monographs tend to be rather hands-off: they rely on peer reviewers for content, and tend to leave style to the author. This can be both a good and a bad thing: in general, I think it would make sense for authors and indeed editors of academic books to devote some time and energy to style and presentation: well-written books tend to be more influential.”

7. On money

A recent survey of more than 9,000 authors of all types of books found that almost 80 per cent earned less than £600 a year. A first book is unlikely to change your financial fortunes, but with the right approach there should be other benefits.

Richard J. Evans: "Forget about an advance for a first book unless it's with a commercial publisher such as Penguin, Bloomsbury or Little, Brown. Just think of the secondary income it can generate and benefits to your academic career."

Jos Boys: "Few publishers pay fees any more for 'conventional' academic monographs; they merely give advances against royalties. In addition, they may well take costs such as indexing out of any earnings. Only a very few authors make money out of this process, and usually only when the book is sure to have wide commercial success."

Barbara Graziosi: "Making money out of writing is difficult, even for full-time writers. Some academics write commercially successful books, but this is not the norm and should not be a primary consideration (if the aim is to produce a book of scholarly significance). I think that if publishers offer outstanding peer review and excellent production (including copy-editing, which is in fact currently sliding from generally mediocre to largely incompetent), as well as wide distribution, academic authors should be satisfied. Narrowly academic books do not make much money, but the money that is made can (in my view) legitimately go to the publishers, if they offer all of the above."

8. On agents

Many scholarly authors will not have - or need - an agent, but many authors writing potentially more popular books, especially in history and popular science, do. A good agent can be a godsend. But they are not essential, or appropriate, for all authors. Much will depend on whether your book has wider, commercial appeal.

Barbara Graziosi: "I am not sure how one goes about finding a good agent, because my agent found me. My first book, based on my doctoral thesis and published by Cambridge University Press, was deemed to be well written, and I began to be mentioned as an academic who could write things people enjoyed reading. Then Catherine Clarke, of Felicity Bryan Associates, got in touch and taught me how to pitch a proposal to commercial publishers. The proposal did well and received various offers: at that point, at least as far as the UK auction was concerned, I had to choose between a publisher I liked and trusted (Profile

Books) and one that offered more money. My agent supported my choice of Profile Books, even though it represented a short-term loss of income for her. She also helped me negotiate conflicting feedback I received from my UK and my US publishers on the same manuscript, and generally helped me to make the best use of feedback, without losing my own perspective on what I had written. My experience of working with my agent is entirely positive: I admire her insight and her patience.”

Cary Cooper: “I have never used an agent but if your book is a more popular scholarly book, you might consider this route. For most academic books, with reasonable sales potential but not large market reach, you can find a publisher yourself without involving an agent. You can do this by surveying similar books to the one you want to write and shortlisting a few publishers that seem most appropriate. If you do take this route – and your book is not overly country- or culture-specific – make sure that the publisher you choose has global reach so that your scholarly book or monograph can fulfil its potential in other countries.”

Richard J. Evans: “An agent is good to have if you think your book will have commercial appeal and especially if there’s a prospect of translation into other languages (publishers don’t bother about this because it’s not worth the trouble, given the small amount of income for them). Ask friends and colleagues who have agents; experiences vary. Go for one who really cares about books rather than just seeing them as commercial objects.”

9. On marketing and international sales

What will be done and by whom? How many copies will be serviced? Is there a marketing plan available for the author to see? Publicity matters, and some academic publishers perform poorly in this area so it is worth doing your research. Think about international markets, but be realistic.

Richard J. Evans: “Almost all publishers send authors a marketing form, but only for commercial (trade) books will they try to arrange radio appearances for the author; otherwise make sure the book gets sent to the quality press and weeklies. For academic books there are few marketing opportunities; try to find out which publishers make an effort to get their books into the bookshops

rather than relying on mail-order catalogues and Amazon (sadly, far too many academic publishers do this). It is also worth thinking about translation rights. For a first book you are not in a position to bargain much, but you can write into the contract the right to approve translations (get a friend to look through translations into languages you don't read); for later books, if at all possible, do not sign away world rights. That will allow you (or your agent) to sign contracts with foreign publishers, which UK publishers won't bother to do."

Barbara Graziosi: "Be clear about what kind of book you have written. Sometimes authors of narrowly academic books expect the same kind of publicity and promotion that suits a book for general readers. That can lead to disappointment."

Cary Cooper: "Most authors do not ask at the beginning of the selection process whether the publisher can market the book internationally. Some publishers will say they don't have the outlets in the US or elsewhere but will sell your title in that market to another publisher or the rights at a book fair, in English or other languages. Normally, foreign rights don't earn you much money, but it is a vehicle to get your book out there to a wider audience. You need to be realistic, however, about its international potential."

10. On the finished product

For many authors, nothing beats the feeling of holding the first copy of their published book.

Tim Birkhead: "There are several high spots in the process: one is sending the manuscript off; another (and better) is getting the proofs; better still is getting the book itself. Having the book physically in your hands, turning the pages and remembering the blood, sweat and tears that went into it, is a moment of euphoria...and, of course, getting good reviews is great, too."



The authors

Richard J. Evans is Regius professor of history at the University of Cambridge (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-cambridge>) and president of Wolfson College. His books include the Third Reich trilogy (published between 2003 and 2008) and *Altered Pasts: Counterfactuals in History* (2014).

Tim Birkhead is professor of behaviour and evolution at the University of Sheffield (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-sheffield>). His latest books are *Ten Thousand Birds: Ornithology Since Darwin* (2014) and *Bird Sense: What it's Like to be a Bird* (2012).

Jos Boys is director of student enhancement in the Faculty of Arts, Design and Social Sciences at Northumbria University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/northumbria-university>). Her books include *Towards Creative Learning Spaces: Re-thinking the Architecture of Post-Compulsory Education* (2010).

Barbara Graziosi is professor of Classics and director for the arts and humanities of the Institute of Advanced Study, Durham University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/durham-university>). Her most recent book is *The Gods of Olympus: A History* (<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/books/the-gods-of-olympus-a-history-by-barbara-graziosi/2009712.article>) (2013).

Martin McQuillan is professor of literary theory and cultural analysis and dean of arts and social sciences at Kingston University
(<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/kingston-university>). His books include *Roland Barthes (or the Profession of Cultural Studies)* (2011) and *Deconstruction without Derrida* (2012).

Susan Bassnett is professor of comparative literature at the University of Warwick
(<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-warwick>). Her books include *Translation Studies* (1980), *Comparative Literature* (1993) and *Reflections on Translation* (2011).

Alan Ryan is emeritus professor of political theory, University of Oxford
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Cary Cooper is distinguished professor of organisational psychology and health at Lancaster University
(<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/lancaster-university>) and author of more than 160 books.



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READER'S COMMENTS (3)

#1 (/comment/1388#comment-1388) Submitted by mgpiety on March 6, 2014 - 1:59pm

"[W]ell-known publishers with a strong academic and international reputation ... act as much tougher 'gatekeepers'". Really? Then how is it that Princeton University Press published a biography of Kierkegaard AFTER it had been completely discredited in Denmark and then, when they discovered their mistake, tried to cover it up by issuing a partially corrected edition without any indication to readers that it was a new edition (see: <http://pietyonkierkegaard.com/2012/08/23/kirmmses-cover-up/>)? In my experience, even many of the higher-profile academic publishers care more about making money than about the quality of the material they publish.

#2 (/comment/17439#comment-17439) Submitted by CateHogan on May 9, 2017 - 12:56pm

*A very helpful article, thanks! I've been trialing editors for my current romance WIP, including industry stalwarts from The Big Four, to freelancers and hobbyists, *budget* options and the gurus who cost a pretty penny. From 9 to 5 I'm an editor myself, so it's been great experiencing the process from a writer's perspective. I've documented some tips below on what to look for in an editor (and what should send you running), which you might find interesting.*

<http://catehogan.com/25-things-look-for-romance-editor/>

#3 (/comment/22112#comment-22112) Submitted by skulls12 on November 8, 2017 - 8:29pm

I am a novice writer who is working on his first book, therefore I am joining any society I can. The "THE" has a lot of tidbits that I am processing "as we speak". So thanks, I have to get back to editing. One thing, however, has come to mind; How do you feel about publishing with Amazon or the like?

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